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ABSTRACT

The "Main Street Mississippi Meets the Third World" project was designed to demonstrate that hometown newspapers can provide relevant news stories about developing countries without leaving the local community. Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and the "American" were the selected site and newspaper. The project involved working with students in the University of Southern Mississippi's journalism classes; "American" reporters, photographers, and artists; and the "American's" managing editor. The result--a five-day, front-page series--included stories on exports, imports, migrants, students, and foreign aid. Pre- and postseries surveys assessed the readers' new expectations and reading behaviors, and the effects of the third world stories on readers' perceptions of Hattiesburg's interdependence with third world countries. Subjects in the pre-survey (n=229) and the post-survey (n=279) were randomly selected from the Hattiesburg 1984 telephone directory, but only subjects who said they read the "American" were questioned. Results indicate that the series significantly influenced readers' perceptions of Hattiesburg's economic interdependence with third world countries and Hattiesburg citizens' contributions to improved conditions in third world countries. (Survey forms are appended.) (DF)

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HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: ITS EFFECTS ON PERCEIVED INTERDEPENDENCE OF NATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

There is an unwritten rule among journalists that local news is news and foreign news is foreign, that readers want plenty of the former and tolerate small doses of the latter. Unforuntunately, some research (Robinson & Levy, 1983) supports this rule. However, as American economic, political, and social ties with the rest of the world multiply and as the center of gravity of American foreign relations gradually shifts from the Old World, Europe to the poor developing countries of the Third World, journalists are compelled to challange this rule. As important as it is for Americans to understand global interdependence, reporting and explaining foreign news is not becoming easier. The cost of sending reporters abroad and the number of countries to be covered have increased dramatically; thus, the number of foreign correspondents has declined. Assuming American newspapers are obligated to provide a steady flow of foreign news, one challenge is to find creative, cost-effective ways of bringing foreign news to readers. Moreover, as journalists (e.g., Reston) and researchers (Robinson & Levy, 1983) point out, a second challenge is to get readers to read the stories. This paper reports one attempt to meet these challenges. Specifically, the "Main Street Mississippi Meets the Third World" project designed to demonstrate that local, hometown newspapers can provide relevant, creative newsstories about developing countries without leaving the local community is described. Results of pre and post-series surveys assessing readers' news expectations, reading behaviors, and perceptions of Hattiesburg's interdependence with third world countries are presented.

"MAIN STREET MISSISSIPPI MEETS THE THIRD WORLD" PROJECT

Numerous attempts to increase journalistic understanding and coverage of the developing world have been made. American journalists have swapped positions with foreign journalists. Editors and reporters have taken overseas tours. Peter Bird Martin created a news service on the Third World for American newspapers, and conferences were held to educate editors and reporters. While the results were mixed, one common problem persists, reporters fail to make third world news relevant to the communities. While the press has not attempted such relevancy, other organizations have. A notable example is Ohio State University's "Columbus In the World: The World in Columbus" project. The project involved identifying community links with the rest of the world, developing community awareness through local schools and civic organizations, and ultimately building new institutions that use local talent to educate people, rather than bringing outsiders to pontificate on the world. The Columbus World Affairs Council has become a model for similar efforts in 29 other cities. The project described here may be seen as a journalistic analogue to the Ohio State project.

Newspaper and Site Selection Selection

Hattiesburg, Mississippi and the AMERICAN were selected for several reasons. First, few states provide a better testing ground than Mississippi. It is what an eminent historian called a "closed society," and often as not Mississippians like it that way. Only New Mexico has a higher percentage of people who have lived all their lives in the same home. The state college board

maintains higher university admission standards for foreigners than for Americans. The traditional Southern suspicion of the federal government and reverence for states' rights is perhaps nowhere stronger. Government foreign aid programs have all the appeal Yankee carpetbaggers had in the last century. Second, the University of Southern Mississippi with its School of Communication made Hattiesburg a prime choice for the project. Third, the Hattiesburg AMERICAN is a typical community-oriented daily with a circulation of 25,000.

Story Research and Production

John M. Hamilton, the principal reporter, moved to Hattiesburg, Mississippi for one month. He worked with students in the University of Southern Mississippi's journalism classes; AMERICAN reporters, photographers, artists; and Frank Sutherland, the AMERICAN'S managing editor. Specifically, the five-day, front-page series included stories on exports, imports, migrants, students, and foreign aid.

Export stories focused on more than a dozen businesses in the county with substantial sales to Third World Countries. Businesses included Panama Pump Company with its five fulltime employees and Hercules Chemical, one of the area's largest employers. For some companies, exports accounted for up to 90% of total annual sales. Moreover, virtually all the locally grown soybeans and wheat go abroad to Nigeria, Mexico, and Korea.

Import stories revealed greater dependence on Third World countries than most readers' realized. Hercules Chemical discontinued extracting rosin locally and began importing it from the People's Republic of China last year. Music and flower

businesses import a large share of merchandise from Asian countries while manufacturing firms import steel and motors from Third World countries. A nearby Chevron refinery imports more than two-thirds of its petroleum from developing countries.

Migrant stories focused on a Nigerian M.D., a Chilean small business executive, and several Chinese and Korean families who have done well in the restaurant businesses. Student stories revealed increased enrollment of foreign students at the University of Southern Mississippi and at William Carey College. Other stories focused on foreign athletes on USM's soccer team. Finally, some stories stressed local USM faculty members' foreign involvements, e.g., a political science professor played a mediating role in the constitutional settlement between the Turks and the Greeks on Cyprus.

Foreign aid stories revealed that Hattiesburg has its share of foreign-aid programs. Local Baptist churches regularly contribute to overseas missions and recently made large contributions for famine relief in Africa. Mississippi Catholics sponsor a mission in Mexico and provide 30 tons of beans a month to the mission.

Side-Bar stories focused on numerous Third World ties such as one local bank and its substantial loans in Third World countries. Environmental problems in Panama causing low water levels in the canal which hold up shipping from the Mississippi Gulf port. Local drug problems were traced to developing countries where poor farmers, desperate for cash, grow coca used in making cocaine.

SURVEYS

Pre and post-series surveys assessed readers' news expectations, reading behaviors, and the effects of the third world stories on readers' perceptions of Hattiesburg's interdependence with third world countries.

Subjects

Subjects in the pre-survey (n=299) and the post-survey (n=279) were randomly selected from the Hattiesburg, Mississippi 1984 telephone directory. Only subjects who said they read the AMERICAN were included in the surveys. Subjects were selected from 2 of the 5 counties in which the AMERICAN is circulated. The 2 counties surveyed, however, contain the largest number of subscribers.

Questionnaire Construction

A 19-item questionnaire was constructed for the pre-survey (AppendixA). The specific question breakdown was: 2 subject screening, 5 news expectation, 5 interdependence, 3 third world stories general reading behavior, and 4 demographic questions. In the post-survey, 6 specific questions concerning the series stories were added to the 19 questions (Appendix B).

Procedures

The pre-survey was conducted 6 weeks before the series ran and the post-survey was conducted the evening the series ended. Interviewers, 25 undergraduate and graduate students, were trained and completed trial interviews before the survey. All telephoning was done from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. the same evenings at the university under constant supervision.

Data Analyses

The data were subjected to the test for significance of the difference between two proportions at the $p<.05$ level of confidence.

RESULTS

Generally, the results indicate that the series significantly influenced readers' perceptions of Hattiesburg's economic interdependence with third world countries and Hattiesburg citizens' contributions to improved conditions in third world countries. Specifically, the results will be presented by topic areas: (1) news expectations, (2) general reading behavior of third world stories, (3) specific reading behavior of series stories, and (4) the interdependence questions. Demographic differences and qualifications will be presented when significant.

News Expectations

Four questions asked subjects if they read the AMERICAN for local, state, national, and international news often, sometimes, seldom, or never. Generally, subjects' responses to these questions did not change significantly. Specifically, 92% (pre) and 93% (post) of the subjects surveyed reported they read the AMERICAN for local news often and sometimes. Next, 78% (pre) and 76% (post) of the subjects reported they read the AMERICAN for state news often and sometimes. Third, 79% (pre) and 66% (post) of the subjects reported they read the AMERICAN for national news often and sometimes; this difference is significant at

$p<.05$. Fourth, 61% (pre) and 52% (post) of the subjects surveyed reported they read the AMERICAN for international news often and sometimes. The last news expectation question asked if subjects think it is very important, important, not very important, or not at all important for the AMERICAN to provide more news about events and developments in poorer countries. 73% (pre) and 72% (post) of the subjects surveyed indicated that it is very important and important for the AMERICAN to provide those stories.

General Third World Story Reading Behavior

Three questions asked subjects if they read (1) general stories about poorer countries, (2) third world economic development stories, and (3) third world political event stories in the AMERICAN very carefully, carefully, not very carefully, or not at all. Regarding general stories about poorer countries, 81% (pre) and 83% (post) of the subjects surveyed indicated they read such stories very carefully, carefully, and not very carefully. Regarding economic develoment stories, 89% (pre) and 90% (post) of the subjects surveyed indicated they read such stories very carefully, carefully, and not very carefully. Regarding political events stories, 90% (pre) and 88% (post) of the subjects surveyed indicated they read such stories very carefully, carefully, and not very carefully. It should be noted that results of the pre-survey were not revealed to reporters preparing the series.

Series Readership

While there were more than 6 stories in the series including side-bars and stories by AMERICAN reporters, the 6 stories asked about in the post survey were the main, front-page stories in the series. Generally, the readership, 38%-57% depending upon the story, was good by newspaper standards. Specifically, readership (very carefully, carefully, not very carefully) by story was: (1) Joe Morgan export = 38%, (2) USM foreign students = 57%, (3) Leaf River Products export = 52%, (4) Hercules Chemical imports = 51%, (5) Hattiesburg's third world residents = 46%, and (6) Hattiesburg's missionaries = 47%.

Hattiesburg's Interdependence

Of the 5 questions assessing subjects' perceptions of Hattiesburg's interdependence with third world countries, 2 indicated significant ($p<.05$) changes, 1 indicated a closely significant change ($p<.07$), and 2 indicated non-significant changes in the predicted direction. The two questions with non-significant changes in the predicted direction asked if subjects strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree that what happens in one country influences another country. 86% (pre) and 88% (post) of the subjects surveyed strongly agree and agree with that statement. The second question with non-significant changes in the predicted direction asked subjects if they think it is very important, important, not very important, or not at all important to understand political, social, and economic conditions in poorer countries. 91% (pre) and 92% (post) of the subjects surveyed indicated they think it is very important and important to understand those conditions.

The question that indicated a closely significant perception change ($p<.07$) asked subjects if they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree that political and social upheavals in poorer countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have a direct impact on Hattiesburg. Specifically, 41% (pre) and 48% (post) of the subjects surveyed strongly agree and agree with that statement.

Two questions indicated significant perception changes ($p<.05$). The first asked if subjects strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree that economic growth in poorer countries promotes economic growth in Hattiesburg. Specifically, 42% (pre) and 55% (post) of the subjects surveyed indicated they strongly agree and agree with that statement. The second highly significant question asked if subjects strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree that Hattiesburg citizens contribute to improved conditions in these poorer countries. Specifically, 61% (pre) and 72% (post) of the subjects surveyed strongly agree and agree with that statement.

DISCUSSION

First, the results are discussed by topic areas: (1) news expectations, (2) general third world story reading behaviors, (3) series readership, and (4) Hattiesburg's interdependence. Some directions for future research are then presented.

News Expectations

These questions assessed subjects' news expectations of the AMERICAN. Secifically, both surveys revealed a declining news expectation pattern going from local news to state and national

news to international news last. That is, subjects reported that they read the AMERICAN 92% and 93% of the time for local news. Notice the significant drop to 78% and 76% for state news and 79% and 66% for nation news. Finally, subjects read the AMERICAN 61% and 52% of the time for international news. While these results are not surprising, there are two probable explanations. First, almost all subjects reported reading two newspapers regularly: the AMERICAN and ususally the Jackson CLARION-LEDGER. The CLARION-LEDGER, the largest state daily, eminates from the state capitol. Most people read the CLARION-LEDGER for state and national news. A second explanation for this news expectation pattern is that many subjects reported that they watch television for national and international news. Thus, while the series stories affected subjects' perceptions about Hattiesburg's interdependence with third world countries, they did not change subjects' news expectations for the AMERICAN: they read it for local news.

General Third World Story Reading Behaviors

Newspaper reading behavior is difficult to measure. What is reading? Is "skimming" a story reading? Three questions were included to assess how carefully subjects reportedly read third world stories in general with the idea that even a shift from reading "not very carefully" to "carefully" might be significant. However, results indicate that the series stories did not significantly affect reported reading behavior. Rather, these results are consistent with Robinson and Levy (1983) in that roughly 50% of the subjects reported reading third world stories

"not very carefully."

Series Readership

The series readership for all but one stor was at or above the nationwide average of front-page readership of 47% Thus, these results challenge Reston's adage that "The people of the United States will do anything for Latin American except read about it." Again, it should be noted that many subjects reported skimming the stories, saying they did not read them carefully but they read them.

Hattiesburg's Interdependence

Changing readers' perceptions and attitudes concerning Hattiesburg's interdependence with third world countries was one of the main purposes of this project. Assuming all intervening variables were equal during both surveys, these stories significantly changed subjects' attitudes and perceptions concerning Hattiesburg's economic interdependence with third world countries. Moreover, significant attitude changes concerning Hattiesburg citizens' impact on the quality of life in third world countries were identified. These results are not surprising as they reflect the primary themes of the series stories. Changing attitudes and perceptions is not simple; these stories are a beginning. In order to continue the positive impact of such journalism, editors and reporters must commit to daily doses of such stories.

Directions for Future Research

One study does not truth make! Obviously, replication and extention of the project are needed. What if we surveyed AMERICAN readers today? Would their attitudes concerning

Hattiesburg's interdependence with third world countries be the same? Reading newspapers is a daily activity and if the AMERICAN wants to continue to affect readers' perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge of Hattiesburg's interdependence with third world countries, the AMERICAN must continue to print such stories. This project demonstrated that third world economic, political, and social events are relevant to Americans and journalists have a responsibility to continue investigating and reporting the ties.

REFERENCE

Robinson, J. & Levy, M. (1983) "What do Readers Digest?" Washington Journalism Review,, 38-40.

APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI
SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION
DR. SUSAN SILTANEN

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE FOR

ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER REPORTING ON DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

V	C	
[1	1-2]	Interviewer Name_____
[2	3-5]	Interviewer Code_____
		Interview Date_____

Hello, my name is _____. I am a student in the School of Communication at the University of Southern Mississippi. We're conducting a short survey about your attitudes and opinions concerning types of news stories that appear in local newspapers. Your phone number was randomly selected from the telephone directory. Would you help us for a few minutes? Your answers will be anonymous. [PAUSE. IF PERSON IS UNWILLING, TRY TO RESCHEDULE. IF NO, THEN:] Thank you anyway. Good Bye.

[IF YES,]: Thank you very much. I will read you a series of questions about your attitudes and opinions about various news stories. There are no right or wrong answers, so feel free to give your honest opinions. We have found that people do best if they think about each question before answering and give us as much information as possible. Ok, the first question:

V	C	
[3	6]	1. How many newspapers do you read regularly?_____(exact number)
[4	7-8]	2. Please tell me what newspaper you read regularly:

_____Hattiesburg American _____Petal Journal
_____Clarion Ledger _____Times-Picayune
_____USA Today _____Other specify:_____

[IF PERSON DOES NOT READ THE HATTIESBURG AMERICAN]: Thank you. This concludes the interview.

[IF PERSON DOES READ THE HATTIESBURG AMERICAN, CONTINUE INTERVIEW] This is going well.

[11 15] 9. Do you read the American for local news? Often, sometimes, seldom, or never?

_____OFTEN _____SELDOM
_____SOMETIMES _____NEVER

[12 16] 10. What about state news? Do you read the AMERICAN often, sometimes, seldom, or never for state news?

_____OFTEN _____SELDOM
_____SOMETIMES _____NEVER

[13 17] 11. What about the national news? Often, sometimes, seldom, or never?

_____OFTEN _____SELDOM
_____SOMETIMES _____NEVER

[14 18] 12. What about international news? Do you read the AMERICAN often, sometimes, seldom, or never for international news?

_____OFTEN _____SELDOM
_____SOMETIMES _____NEVER

For the next series of questions, please think specifically about international news about poorer, economically underdeveloped countries such as Bangladesh, Thailand, Chad, and Bolivia.

[15 19] 13. Do you read news stories in the AMERICAN about such poorer countries VERY CAREFULLY, CAREFULLY, NOT VERY CAREFULLY, OR NOT AT ALL?

_____VERY CAREFULLY _____NOT VERY CAREFULLY
_____CAREFULLY _____NOT AT ALL

Would you tell me why? [RECORD EXACT RESPONSE]:

[16 20] 14. Do you STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, DISAGREE, OR STRONGLY DISAGREE that economic growth in these poorer countries promotes economic growth in Hattiesburg?

_____STRONGLY AGREE _____DISAGREE
_____AGREE _____STRONGLY DISAGREE

[17 21] 15. Do you STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, DISAGREE OR STRONGLY DISAGREE that political and social upheavals in poorer countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have a direct impact on Hattiesburg?

_____STRONGLY AGREE _____DISAGREE
_____AGREE _____STRONGLY DISAGREE

[18 22] 16. Recently, there has been a great deal of talk about the interdependence of countries or that what happens in one country influences other countries. Do you STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, DISAGREE, OR STRONGLY DISAGREE that what happens in one country influences another country?

_____STRONGLY AGREE _____DISAGREE
_____AGREE _____STRONGLY DISAGREE

[19 23] 17. Do you think it is VERY IMPORTANT, IMPORTANT, NOT VERY IMPORTANT, OR NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT to understand political, social, and economic conditions in poorer countries?

_____VERY IMPORTANT _____NOT VERY IMPORTANT
_____IMPORTANT _____NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT

[20 24] 18. Do you read stories concerning economic developments in poorer countries VERY CAREFULLY, CAREFULLY, NOT VERY CAREFULLY OR NOT AT ALL?

_____VERY CAREFULLY _____NOT VERY CAREFULLY
_____CAREFULLY _____NOT AT ALL

[21 25] 19. What about political events in poorer countries? Do you read them VERY CAREFULLY, CAREFULLY, NOT VERY CAREFULLY, OR NOT AT ALL?

_____VERY CAREFULLY _____NOT VERY CAREFULLY
_____CAREFULLY _____NOT AT ALL

[22 26] 20. Do you think that it is VERY IMPORTANT, IMPORTANT, NOT VERY IMPORTANT, OR NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT for the AMERICAN to provide more news about events and developments in poorer countries?

_____VERY IMPORTANT _____NOT VERY IMPORTANT
_____IMPORTANT _____NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT

[23 27] 21. Do you STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, DISAGREE, OR STRONGLY DISAGREE that Hattiesburg citizens contribute to improved conditions of citizens of these poorer countries?

_____STRONGLY AGREE _____DISAGREE
_____AGREE _____STRONGLY DISAGREE

Thank you. Now, I have a few final questions that will help us process this information.

[24 28] 22. Please tell me your race [READ CATEGORIES IF NO ANSWER]:

_____BLACK AMERICAN _____OTHER_____
_____WHITE AMERICAN SPECIFY_____

[25 29] 23. Next, what age were you on your last birthday? [READ CATEGORIES IF NO ANSWER]:

_____15-17 _____41-49
_____18-24 _____50-59
_____25-30 _____60-69
_____31-35 _____70 & Over
_____36-40 No answer_____

[26 30] 24. What is the last grade you completed in school [READ CATEGORIES OF NO ANSWER]:

_____1-8th grade
_____9-11th grade
_____HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE
_____TWO YEARS COLLEGE
_____COLLEGE GRADUATE
_____POST GRADUATE
_____NO ANSWER

[27 31] 25. [CODE INTERVIEWEE S SEX:_____F _____M

Thank you very much for your help. This concludes the interview. Good Bye.

[28 32-34] _____Subject number.

APPENDIX B

This past week the AMERICAN ran a series of stories about Hattiesburg's ties to third world, developing countries.

[5 9] 3. Did you read the story about missionaries like the Davises and Glen Corley who have spent time in Ghana and raised money for people there VERY CAREFULLY, CAREFULLY, NOT VERY CAREFULLY, OR NOT AT ALL?

_____VERY CAREFULLY _____NOT VERY CAREFULLY
_____CAREFULLY _____NOT AT ALL

V C
[6 10] 4. Did you read the story about Joe Morgan and Hattiesburg's agricultural exports to Asia and other developing countries VERY CAREFULLY, CAREFULLY, NOT VERY CAREFULLY, OR NOT AT ALL?

_____VERY CAREFULLY _____NOT VERY CAREFULLY
_____CAREFULLY _____NOT AT ALL

[7 11] 5. Did you read the story about foreign students at USM VERY CAREFULLY, CAREFULLY, NOT VERY CAREFULLY, OR NOT AT ALL?

_____VERY CAREFULLY _____NOT VERY CAREFULLY
_____CAREFULLY _____NOT AT ALL

[8 12] 6. Did you read the story about local businesses like Leaf River Products and Miller Picking who export products to third world developing countries VERY CAREFULLY, CAREFULLY, NOT VERY CAREFULLY, OR NOT AT ALL?

_____VERY CAREFULLY _____NOT VERY CAREFULLY
_____CAREFULLY _____NOT AT ALL

[9 13] 7. Did you read the story about local third world residents like Dr. Asema from Nigeria, Mr. Beaton from Cuba, and the Wus who own South China restaurant VERY CAREFULLY, CAREFULLY, NOT VERY CAREFULLY, OR NOT AT ALL?

_____VERY CAREFULLY _____NOT VERY CAREFULLY
_____CAREFULLY _____NOT AT ALL

[10 14] 8. Did you read the story about Hercules Manufacturing importing from third world, developing countries VERY CAREFULLY, CAREFULLY, NOT VERY CAREFULLY, OR NOT AT ALL?

_____VERY CAREFULLY _____NOT VERY CAREFULLY
_____CAREFULLY _____NOT AT ALL